

# History & Archaeology

## The Prospects of the Age

### *Optimists & Others—By ASA BRIGGS*

FOR THE FIRST TIME since the Edwardian years some of the key themes in Victorian Liberalism have acquired a sense of topicality. Mrs Thatcher and her ministers grapple with familiar Liberal issues like the relationship between the market and the state, the relative influence of voluntary initiative and effort and of statutory obligation, and, not least, the reconciliation in political activity of short-term tactics and long-term objectives.

In such circumstances, a bundle of recent history books which if they had appeared a few years ago might have been regarded, as most books on the Victorians then were, as means of escape from the pressures of the present, may now be regarded as significant methods of illumination. There is a danger, of course, in treating history books, certainly in judging them, in this limited way. Yet because most, though not all, of recent political debate within the Conservative party and between the parties has taken economics, A-level or above, as its framework of reference, it is useful to turn to the historical framework, bearing in mind, of course, that during the early Victorian years Britain's industrial economy was in the lead and that now it is—and for long has been—in manifest decline.

It is this last and most obvious contrast between past and present, though it is not explored at any length, which provides Ian Bradley with the title of his study of Victorian Liberalism, *The Optimists*.<sup>1</sup> Although he includes chapters on "Non-Intervention and Self-Determination" and "The Voluntary Principle", and recognises that as attitudes towards the state are changing now we need to review 19th-century experience, he rather disappointingly—and misleadingly—concentrates on "optimism" as the unifying theme linking 19th-century Liberals (liberals with a capital L) together. In his highly readable but somewhat superficial

book, packed with fascinating quotations, but covering ground well trodden by earlier historians, he dwells above all else on the Liberal faith in "the goodness and rationality of man and the reality of progress." He argues that while the Liberal Party, as Sir William Harcourt described it, was "a house of many mansions, like the Kingdom of Heaven", Liberals shared "a fundamental optimism about life in its larger aspects." Lord Salisbury confessed his admiration for (or was it envy of?) Gladstone's "gorgeous, reckless optimism", and Mr Bradley believes that although world depression, two wars and the vicissitudes of the welfare state have ensured that "optimism is not a very dominant motif in the outlook of our own age", "the Victorian Liberals still have much to offer us today, not least in their refreshing and inspiring optimism."

I AM NOT SURE, however, that "optimism" is the key to the story he tells and the analysis which he presents. The Christian *credo* of the leading figure in the story, Gladstone, did not include any article concerning the perfectibility of man. Gladstone's *Diaries* continue to make this plain.<sup>2</sup> They are being superbly edited by H. C. G. Matthew in an impressive display of modern historical scholarship, and they reveal both in a number of long and often eloquent set pieces and in a mass of bare detail just how complex a character Gladstone was, how varied were the influences brought to bear upon him, and how powerful was the tug inside him between inclination and duty. Can we label as "optimistic", to take one example out of many, the birthday entry for 1856?

"While I am not conscious of any measurable progress in the warfare with particular sins, I am becoming alive to a new evil and danger in this that the ties which bind me to this world are growing more numerous and stronger."

This was the private view of a barely middle-aged Gladstone, who throughout the 1850s felt a sense of "rebellion against growing old": "there is a resistance to the passage of Time as if I could lay

<sup>1</sup> *The Optimists: Themes and Personalities in Victorian Liberalism*. By IAN BRADLEY. Faber, £12.50.

<sup>2</sup> *The Gladstone Diaries: Volumes Five (1855-1860) and Six (1861-1868)*. Edited by H. C. G. MATTHEW. Clarendon Press: Oxford University Press, £40.



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hands on it and stop it." Yet the aged Gladstone, the "Grand Old Man", also had too many doubts about himself and the world to be described easily as an optimistic believer in progress. Oxford dons were not alone in remarking how much he looked back to the past rather than gazed forwards into the future; and the same pattern was revealed in his fascinating conversations with Lionel Tollemache at Biarritz during the 1890s. Thus, on one occasion in 1896, Gladstone replied to Tollemache's question, "Are you not inclined to take a thoroughly sanguine view of the prospects of this very reforming age?" with the reply, "Not altogether. The future is to me a blank. I cannot at all guess what is coming." He feared that "the love of money" would corrupt as much as socialism, warned against "the danger from the growth of that dreadful military spirit", and recalled how the "moral standard" of "public men" had deteriorated in England during his lifetime rather than improved. He insisted more generally that while he considered "the existence of evil inexplicable", he did not doubt the fact of it.

"The real problem was that of the origin and existence of evil, not its extinction; and this problem was wholly insoluble by man."

IT WOULD BE A MISTAKE to believe that Gladstone was unique among 19th-century liberals in looking at the future with some misgiving. There was a gloomy streak in John Bright, too. Thus, at the Manchester Banquet of 1878 held to celebrate the opening of Waterhouse's imposing new Town Hall, Bright chose to speak not of the triumphs of free trade or the political victories associated with the extension of the suffrage, but of the vulnerable dependence of the country on coal, iron and, not least, cotton. "Perhaps it is necessary to contemplate a distant period when our Town Hall will be a vast heap of ivy-mantled ruins." Keith Robbins in his tidy biography of Bright<sup>3</sup> refers briefly to the address without quoting this passage, but suggests on the basis of no evidence that this and other addresses "represented rhetoric to order rather than the expression of deep feeling." He rightly notes, however, that by then Bright was deeply and beyond all doubt genuinely pessimistic about the future of India, a subject which had long interested him: England might well "receive her greatest humiliation [there] the way she has boasted of her greatest triumph."

There are more references in Ian Bradley's book to John Bright than to any other persons except Gladstone himself and John Stuart Mill—with Bright's friend Richard Cobden, and Gladstone's biographer, John Morley, coming next—and it would certainly not be difficult to assemble an

anthology of gloomy passages from either Cobden or Morley. Cobden was particularly sensitive to the failure of his middle-class contemporaries to destroy aristocratic power during the 1850s. He believed, indeed, that they were prostrating themselves at the feet of feudalism, and was equally surprised at working-class acquiescence. "Have they no Spartacus among them to head a revolt of the slave class against their political tormentors?"

As for Morley, *On Compromise*, published in 1874, contains many passages different in tone from those quoted by Bradley. The age, Morley wrote—and the 1870s are more significant than Bradley, with his eyes on the 1880s, suggests—was

an epoch of transition in the very foundations of belief and conduct. The old hopes have grown pale, the old fears dim; strong sanctions are become weak, and once vivid faiths very dumb.

There were missiles in the air, and Liberals could not escape them. Morley lived long enough, fruitlessly, to oppose and unhappily to experience the First World War; and Bradley himself quotes Harold Laski's remark about him in 1920 that he was by then "free from the cant of progress" and a passage from Morley's *Notes on Politics and History* (1923) in which he repeated that it might be an "optimistic superstition" to believe that "civilized communities are universally bound somehow or other to be progressive."

IT WOULD BE AS ABSURD to exaggerate "pessimistic" elements in 19th-century Liberal thought and feeling as to focus attention on optimism as a binding force. Yet Bradley is plainly wrong when he writes of the 19th century as a whole that "only a few lone voices sounded a discordant note" in a "general chorus of complacency and optimism." When Walter Houghton wrote *The Victorian Frame of Mind* (1957), he had to include adjacent chapters on "optimism" and "anxiety." It was Charles Kingsley—not one of Bradley's Liberals with a capital L, but the man who provoked the anti-liberal Newman's *Apologia*—who was the crudest optimist. Consider Lancelot Smith's letter to his Roman Catholic cousin in Kingsley's *Yeast*.

"Give me the political economist, the sanitary reformer, the engineer; and take your saints and virgins, relics and miracles. The spinning jenny and the railroad, Cunard's liners and the electric telegraph are, to me, if not to you, signs that we are on some points at least, in harmony with the Universe."

Houghton quotes a later prophecy of human perfectibility—that of Winwood Reade in his *Martyrdom of Man* (1892):

The God of Light, the Spirit of Knowledge, the

<sup>3</sup> John Bright. By KEITH ROBBINS. Routledge, £8.95.

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This is as far removed from Gladstone as it is from Disraeli.

FOR A REAL OPTIMIST, we have to turn to a pre-Victorian writer, not surprisingly unmentioned by Bradley—William Godwin, born in 1756 and living on until 1836, one year before Queen Victoria came to the throne. After what Hazlitt called a “sultry and unwholesome popularity”, he passed into poverty and obscurity before spending his last few years ironically as a government pensioner—and a pensioner supported by Sir Robert Peel at that. As Godwin’s biographer, Don Locke,<sup>4</sup> puts it succinctly,

The destroyer of pensions had survived the [Whig] destruction of pensions: the Jacobin, threatened by the Whigs, was saved by the Tories.

Godwin is well enough known today, though seldom read—first, for his book *Political Justice*, the first edition of which appeared in 1793, and to a lesser extent for his novels; second, for his marriage in 1797 to the remarkable feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, who died within a few months, and his daughter by her, Mary, who married the poet Shelley; and third, for the impetus given by his much publicised “optimism” to the most gloomy and influential of counter-theses, that of Thomas Malthus on population.

A *Fantasy of Reason*, Locke’s gripping biography with its perfect title—for Godwin was, as he says, “made for satire”—does justice to all three themes, particularly, perhaps, the first. Indeed, Locke is the kind of sympathetic, but in the best sense of the word argumentative, commentator whom Godwin, who could often be difficult, would have welcomed. *Political Justice* was once described as consisting of “borrowed sense and original nonsense” and there was some truth in the judgment if only because Godwin, arguing with himself and changing his mind in different editions, was prepared to push his argument to extremes, not fearing what he politely called “bold or paradoxical” conclusions.

The context, very different from that of mid-Victorian England, was as significant as the content, for from 1789 onwards, to bold spirits at least, “old things seemed to be passing away and nothing was dreamt of but the regeneration of the human

race.” The mood changed, of course, and whereas all Godwin’s writings in retrospect have a transient sheen, Malthus’s were to grip more than one future generation. Yet Godwin had a long-term view when he contemplated the implications of the perfectibility of man. Locke quotes one passage in which he claimed that it would be possible to halt a murderer by sheer strength of argument, though “we are not yet wise enough to make the sword drop out of the hands of our oppressors by the mere form of reason.” The words “not yet” deserve the exclamation mark Locke puts after them.

“The vices of youth”, Godwin believed, “spring not from nature, who is the kind and blameless mother of all her children.” Evil, which puzzled Gladstone, lay not in man but in the institutions which surrounded and moulded him and above all in the “opposition” this produced between “public and private good” and the “monopoly” they created of “advantages which reason directs to be left in common.” Victorian Liberalism was to generate clusters of new institutions—voluntary bodies; campaign committees; clubs; commissions of enquiry; departments of state. Godwin saw peril in every institution, even “liberal” institutions: they all checked or inflamed private judgment.

HIS MAIN MESSAGE is clear, and it was shared by many of his readers before they actually read him.

It is earnestly to be desired that each man was wise enough to govern himself without the interference of any compulsory restraint; and since government even in its best state is an evil, the object principally to be aimed at is, that we should have as little of it as the general pace of human society will permit.

In the second edition Godwin spoke of “the true euthanasia of government.” By the end of the 1790s such talk seemed absurdly extravagant, and one of the Whigs, who at first had sympathised with him, was making fun of “such fanciful chimeras as the golden mountain or the perfect man.” Already “the immortal Godwin” seemed a figure from a bygone age when he was in his early forties, and his worst years, years of beggary and bankruptcy, were still to come. His fellow Utilitarian, Jeremy Bentham—though they argued their philosophies in contrasting ways and drew quite different conclusions from it, as Elie Halévy pointed out years ago—seemed far younger in appearance and spirit.

It is still a matter of debate among historians as to how far Bentham influenced not only his contemporaries but subsequent Victorian generations. No one, however, has claimed any influence for Godwin at all. The irony of the final pension was underlined by the fact that it came from the Conservative Sir Robert Peel, who could write in the

<sup>4</sup> *A Fantasy of Reason: The Life and Thought of William Godwin*. By DON LOCKE. Routledge, £13.50.



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kindest fashion in 1835 that he had “a grateful recollection of the pleasure” he had derived from “those Works, to which, with a just pride, he [Godwin] had referred.”

PEEL ONCE CALLED the word “liberal” an “odious” word. Yet this is the first, not the last, of his words. The Peelite contribution to mid-Victorian Liberalism, as Bradley describes it—not least to the making of its central character, Gladstone—was immense, although Peel gets only four references. His life touches Godwin, but between the golden years of the latter and the Victorians was the new and dividing industrial experience; the extension of the suffrage; and the passing of a new Poor Law, which while not Malthusian, was identified in the popular mind with Malthus.

The first of these great changes, which directed attention *inter alia* to the relative role of market and state and to what could be directed in society and what could and should not, is dealt with too briefly by Bradley, and the third, of crucial importance, is not dealt with at all. Yet as Richard Tompson, author of *The Charity Commission and the Age of Reform*,<sup>5</sup> the most stimulating—and original—of the new books in the bundle puts it, the rarely disputed fact that “industry had a radical power to alter society” influenced the outlook of liberals and conservatives alike, while attitudes to the Poor Law, a substitute for a social policy, anticipated attitudes towards every later branch of social policy once it had been evolved. Ultimately the fate of Victorian Liberalism was bound up with questions of continuing poverty “in the midst of plenty” and the stigmas of pauperism in an age of extended franchise and more complete citizenship.

THE ISSUES ARE COMPLEX, more complex than partisans then and since conceded. Some concerned the dynamics of economic growth; others the social psychology of interest groups; more still the political and administrative process. Sir James Graham, Peel’s *alter ego*—he and Peel were described by *Punch* as two persons with one intellect—was criticised from the radical right for his dangerous “liberal principles” (“odious” though Peel may once have found them), and he had after all been a useful member of the Whig government during the preparation of the Reform Bill and the debates about it. Yet as Home Secretary between

1841 and 1846 he was equally strongly attacked from the radical left (the two extremes, paternalist and Chartist, sometimes converged) for his firm support of the Poor Law, his unwillingness to help Ashley with the Mines Bill of 1842, and his insistence that there were Malthusian obstacles to improvement of the condition of the working classes. The *Westminster Review*, Benthamite radical in its initial inspiration, described his policies generally as policies “of charity, never justice.” There is a topical ring in Graham’s answer to his own question about the Poor Law: “Was an able-bodied man entitled to relief without some kind of test?”—No, or it would not be relief at all but rather “subsistence upon the industry of others.” What can be bleaker than his letter to Peel on working-class education?

“Cheap bread, plenty of potatoes, low-priced American bacon, a little more cheese and butter will have a more pacifying effect than all the mental culture which any Government can supply.”

Yet Graham’s perceptions of the general social context were as clear as those of anyone in the country. The “labouring classes”, he believed, very often had “just cause of complaint against their masters.” The state of society was “artificial”: “it will be seen that a manufacturing people is not so happy as a rural population, and this is the foretaste of becoming the workshop of the world.”

WE CAN NOW APPRECIATE how reluctant many people were to enter that workshop. Manchester radicals had no doubts, but as Bradley points out, there were many Liberals, like Henry Lunn, the Methodist travel agent, who “derived their Liberalism not from Manchester but from Nazareth.” Peelites were more realistic than the paternalists described by David Roberts in his useful survey of *Paternalism in Early Victorian England*<sup>6</sup>: after all, Peel himself was known as the Spinning Jenny. Roberts’s book ends not in 1846, the year of the repeal of the Corn Laws, but in 1844, a year when even Gladstone could be described as paternalist. It may well have been the coexistence of the new classical political economy, widely thought of as a “dismal science”, and of continuing paternalist attitudes which made possible the politics of adaptation without which Britain could never have passed from industrial revolution to industrial routine.

Richard Tompson lays more stress on enquiry and reform than on adaptation, and his pioneering study of the Charity Commission, set up in 1818, is preceded by an admirably lucid general introduction in which he traces the development both of attitudes towards reform and of procedures to

<sup>5</sup> *The Charity Commission and the Age of Reform*. By RICHARD TOMPSON. Routledge, £6.95: University of Toronto Press, \$17.50.

<sup>6</sup> *Paternalism in Early Victorian England*. By DAVID ROBERTS. Croom Helm, £14.95.

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secure it. In it he quotes a passage from an earlier article by Roberts, in which he described "the Victorian administrative state" as "a practical contrivance shaped by men of various persuasions, all of whom were disturbed at the existence of ignorance, disease and misery in their changing society." "It was a very confused and disjointed state", Roberts went on, "and in all probability Bentham himself, the passionate lover of logic and efficiency, would have vigorously disclaimed its authorship."

THERE NEVER WAS one single mid-Victorian Liberal approach to that state. There was dialogue—this was of the essence of Liberalism—and there was development, development which could be considered as evolution. G. M. Young as usual got nearest to the heart of the matter in his essay "The Liberal Mind in Victorian England", written in 1948, when all the talk in Britain was of a welfare state.

In the mid-Victorian years, we settled down into an easy genial compromise between progress and tradition—years when a candidate, being asked about his political opinions might reply, and very often did reply "Sir, I am a liberal Conservative", which meant "our old institutions

have served us well. . . . But I have an open mind, and if there are any improvements which public opinion demands, then I am ready to consider them."

The "open mind" within the awkward, constraining moral and social frame, so brilliantly described by John Stuart Mill, was the key to Victorian Liberalism, not belief in the perfectibility of man; and not all Liberals with a capital L had it. Non-conformity, in particular, could add extra constraints in the name not of mind but of conscience.

Tompson is wise in his introduction to remind historians and others of the dangers of what he calls "the presentist assumption"—when the historian transports the perceptions of his own time into that of his subject. At the same time, a sense of historical perspective is necessary but often lacking in contemporary politics. Every book in this bundle, including Bernard Porter's *The Refugee Question in Mid-Victorian Politics*,<sup>7</sup> the first to deal with this subject, is worth reading in this connection, particularly since many of them point to indispensable further reading on the history of the theory and practice of economic policy which is not well covered in any of them. And if it is said that politicians have no time to read, look at Gladstone's *Diary* and note, if necessary in awe, just how much he read. The last entry in Volume V is particularly appropriate for post-Godwinite politicians—"Read Young on the Province of Reason."

<sup>7</sup> *The Refugee Question in Mid-Victorian Politics*. By BERNARD PORTER. Cambridge University Press, £15.00.

## What the Devil Is It?

### *Recent Work on the Neolithic—By DAVID MILES*

POST-WAR ARCHAEOLOGY in Europe, according to Professor Glyn Daniel, has followed four major trends: an expansion of worldwide perspectives; a growing awareness of the importance of American archaeology and its independent developmental sequences; the increasing utilisation of scientific aids, especially for dating; and the stimulus of intensive studies of protohistoric and historic periods.<sup>1</sup> It is difficult at close quarters to estimate which, if any, will prove to be the most significant of these, but the chief contender for the single most important event in post-war archaeology must be the discovery of radiocarbon dating.

The method was first devised and developed by

<sup>1</sup> Glyn Daniel, *A Hundred and Fifty Years of Archaeology* (1975).

Willard Libby at the Institute of Nuclear Studies in Chicago in the late 1940s and throughout the '50s, and in 1960 he was awarded a Nobel Prize for his work. The first radiocarbon dates from prehistoric Europe came as a surprise because they were so early. In contrast, samples from the East Mediterranean provided dates later than the well-established Egyptian chronology had led archaeologists to expect. The full impact of radiocarbon dating came only with the resolution of this problem. With the construction of an 8,000 year sequence of tree-rings, thanks to the longevity of the Bristlecone Pine, an independent check on the radiocarbon method has been provided. One of Libby's fundamental assumptions has been faulted; the amount of C14 in the atmosphere has not remained stable, and as a result C14 dates beyond about 2,000 years ago are progressively too young.